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Cover as a Shield for Operational Activity

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Of all the appurtenances used by practitioners of the world's second-oldest profession, few are more important or less appreciated than the concept of cover, the basic subterfuge that permits spies to work their craft. Cover has been used for thousands of years with varying degrees of success. Used properly, it can live up to its reputation as the intelligence officer's sine qua non, but its improper use, including that which is known as the old Winsockie syndrome,¹ can bring Cassandra's fate to the clandestine operative and put at risk the most painstakingly crafted operation.

Largely as a result of the popularity of spies and espionage as themes for countless films and books, most people understand the concept of cover.

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Because of the highly personal nature of cover, there are many definitions for the word, but one of the best descriptions is found in the Rockefeller Commission Report:

Many CIA activities—like those of every foreign intelligence service—are clandestine in nature. Involved CIA personnel cannot travel, live, or perform their duties openly as CIA employees.

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Accordingly, virtually all CIA personnel serving abroad and many of the Agency's professional personnel in the United States assume a "cover." Their employment by the CIA is disguised and, to persons other than their families and coworkers, they are held out as employees of another government agency or of a commercial enterprise.

Cover arrangements frequently have substantial domestic aspects. These include the participation of other US Government agencies, business firms, and private citizens

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Ancient History

The Scriptures contain a number of references to spying and covert activities. In one instance, Moses dispatched 12 men, each the leader of an Israelite tribe, on a mission to the land of Canaan to spy on the enemy. Presumably, they used some form of cover because sure death awaited any Israelite who was unlucky enough to be captured by the Canaanites. In another Old Testament passage, Joshua sent two agents on a covert mission to survey the defenses of Jericho. Disguising themselves as visitors, they found lodging with a local woman who was recruited to provide "intelligence and operational support." Because of her loyalty and help, the woman and her family were spared when Joshua's forces destroyed the city after his trumpets brought down Jericho's walls.

In Greek mythology, the Trojan War provided an excellent example of the use of cover. The war between the confederated Greeks and the Trojans, abductors of Helen, had raged for 10 years when the Greeks developed a brilliant strategy. Pretending to abandon their siege of Troy, the Greeks left behind a huge wooden horse. The Trojans, believing the horse to be a sacrifice to Athena, opened the city gates and paraded it through the streets of Troy. During the night, Greek soldiers hidden inside the horse opened the gates to the Greek army, which then destroyed Troy. The Trojan horse could be called the first "cover facility."

Early American Cover

The Revolutionary War in America provided a fertile field for espionage, and both sides used numerous agents. American and British agents, who did not "live" their cover, were captured and dealt with severely. Nathan Hale used the cover of schoolmaster to collect information on British defensive positions and order of battle in New York City. At age 21, he was caught, tried, and hanged by the British. A similar fate awaited Major John Andre,⁴ chief spymaster for Gen. Sir Henry

Clinton. Although Andre was warned to remove his uniform and assume civilian cover, he refused. Andre was hanged by the Continental Army after being caught with detailed information on West Point and its defenses which he had received from Gen. Benedict Arnold. The British enjoyed considerable support in the colonies, and they had a large pool of well-placed sources, including Edward Bancroft, who provided intelligence to the Crown while under cover as the secretary-assistant to Benjamin Franklin.

Gen. George Washington, America's first spymaster,⁵ said, "The greatest benefits are to be derived from persons who live on the other side," a clear reference to productive agents who managed their cover well. To prove the point, Washington ran an asset named John Honeyman, ostensibly a Tory cattleman and butcher who had excellent access to British order of battle and other information of intelligence value to the Continental Army. Honeyman provided intelligence that lead to the American victory at Trenton, which lifted the spirits of the Continental Army and demoralized British forces.

The Civil War

Ten years before the Civil War, as the political, economic, and social rift grew wider between north and south, a farflung loose confederation of clandestine operatives applied cover and other tradecraft tools to a serious mission. Adopting names from the rapidly growing railroad industry, these stalwarts called themselves "brakemen," "firemen," "conductors," and "station masters." They were organizers, conveyers, and safehouse keepers of the Underground Railroad who offered their farms, homes, and businesses as sanctuaries and rest stops for runaway slaves. They also donated their time, wealth, and sometimes their lives to their cause.

Thousands of individuals supported the Underground Railroad, but the real clandestine work was done by a few using such natural cover as ministers, tradesmen, and businessmen. They included Rev. Jermain Loguen, Frederick Douglass, Allan Pinkerton (who ran an underground depot at his coopers shop near Chicago),⁶ Josiah Henson, and Harriet Tubman. After the war

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began, many members of the Underground Railroad used their clandestine skills to serve as spies and scouts for the Union.

The capitals of the opposing forces in the Civil War were less than 100 miles apart, and the battlelines were irregular and porous. This created the perfect milieu for spies on both sides. For example, if farmers from Pennsylvania were good at assuming regional accents, they could easily pass themselves off as farmers from Virginia and vice versa. Clandestine agents on both sides also posed as merchants, traveling salesmen, plantation owners, lawyers, socialites, actors, minstrels, and bankers.

Two of the many notable Civil War agents were Rose Greenhow and Elizabeth Van Lew. The widow Greenhow, under the cover of a Washington socialite, manipulated secrets from many military and civilian callers while in the service of the Confederacy. At one point during her stay in Washington, she was frequently visited by unmarried President James Buchanan. The extent of any information "Rebel Rose" might have received from the President, however, is not known.⁷ The overall quality of her reporting was highly regarded by her superiors in Richmond, and it contributed to the Confederate victory at the first battle of Manassas.

Elizabeth Van Lew, a wealthy spinster and abolitionist, ran a successful spy ring from her Richmond mansion. "Miss Lizzie" or "Crazy Bet," as she was called, calculated correctly that no one strongly pro-Union would be seen as a spy. By playing the role of an addleheaded pro-Unionist, she roamed the city and nearby countryside, memorizing the size of military units and their deployments, and contacted other Union sympathizers. She sent her reports on the thin defensive ring surrounding Richmond directly to Gen. Ulysses S. Grant. In another impressive feat, she penetrated the home of Jefferson Davis by placing one of her agents on the household staff of the president of the Confederacy. This operation produced intelligence of such value that the Union attack against Richmond was made considerably easier. After the war, a grateful US Government appointed Elizabeth Van Lew Postmistress of Richmond.

Even the great counterespionage agent, Allen Pinkerton, the Scottish-born detective and the Union's first spy catcher, used cover. Posing as a Charleston broker, he penetrated and disrupted the plans of a Maryland-based secessionist militia organization that planned to assassinate President-elect Lincoln. William Alvin Lloyd, a publisher of railroad and steamboat guides to the southern states, was another expert at the use of cover. He used his occupation as a transportation expert as cover to spy for the Union, although he sent his intelligence reports directly to President Lincoln. Arrested several times by Confederate authorities, Lloyd maintained his cover and was always released. Belle Boyd, the "Cleopatra of the Confederacy," and Lafayette "Lafe" Baker were other noteworthy spies who used various covers for clandestine collection efforts during the Civil War.

Cover in Other Conflicts

In the era between the Civil War and the Spanish-American War, Washington placed little significance on the systematic gathering of intelligence. The US Army's attitude toward intelligence was summarized in this adage:

The brainy join the Corps of Engineers, the brave go to the Infantry, the hard of hearing to the Artillery, and the stupid to Intelligence.⁸

The destruction of the battleship Maine in Havana harbor on 15 February 1898 shattered the nation's complacency. Edward Breck, a former university student in Heidelberg who spoke excellent German, gathered intelligence on Spanish military and political targets while under cover as a German physician in Spain. Breck was so effective in his cover role that he was quickly absorbed into Spanish social and political circles. Eventually, he met and elicited information from the Spanish grand admiral on the whereabouts and the state of readiness of the Spanish fleet. Later, the US Navy used Breck's intelligence to find and destroy the Spanish Navy, an action that virtually ended the Spanish-American War.⁹

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There were spies galore who operated under a multitude of covers during World War I, but no review of the genre is complete without mentioning Margareta Gertruda Zelle, also known as Mata Hari. As an international dancer, she traveled to Paris, Berlin, London, Rome, and Madrid. She used her boudoir to elicit secret information from government officials in each of those capitals and sold it to the highest bidder. Some historians claim that Mata Hari was executed for revealing the foibles of a number of high-level French officials, who were pilloried in the press.

There are times when cover can be too successful. After World War II, MI6 established a tailor's supply shop in Vienna that ostensibly sold Harris tweed. In reality, the British planned to tunnel from the basement of the premises to an underground conduit and tap the telephone lines between Soviet Army Headquarters and Moscow. Unfortunately, Harris tweed became quite a fashion in Vienna and the "shopkeepers" were kept so busy selling bolts of tweed that they spent more time selling than tunneling. Overwhelmed with orders and unable to focus on the tunnel audio operation, the highly successful "shopkeepers" finally closed their doors. The British Chancellor of the Exchequer received a tidy sum from this operation, but it was to be another five years before a consortium of intelligence agencies embarked on another tunnel operation in Berlin.¹⁰

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NOTES

1. "The Old Winsockie Syndrome." By W. B. Lavender. *Studies in Intelligence*; winter 1990.

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4. "Major John Andre: A Gallant in Spy's Clothing", *Studies in Intelligence*; winter 1992.

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5. *Spying for America: The Hidden History of US Intelligence*. By Nathan Miller. Paragon House, 1989.

6. *The Underground Railroad*. By Sharon Cosner. Franklin Watts Publishing; New York; 1991.

7. *Spies for the Blue and Gray*. By Harnett T. Kane. Ace Books; New York; 1954.

8. *Spying for America*, p. 218.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 171.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 326.

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